

**PRESS CONFERENCE:**

**Major General Kevin J. Bergner, Spokesman, Multi-National Force - Iraq**

**DATE: March 5, 2008**

**TRANSCRIBED BY:**

**SOS INTERNATIONAL LTD.**

**PARTICIPANTS:**

**Major General Kevin Bergner**

**REPORTERS:**

**Ahmed Jassem from Arabiya Newspaper  
Alexandra Zafas[ph] from the LA Times  
Jerry [last name not provided] from AFP**

**Unidentified reporters from Assalam[ph] TV, Darsadam[ph] Agency, the New York Times, London Times, al-Huriya Radio, and Al-Fayhaa TV**

**REPORTERS 1-9**

**\*REP1 = REPORTER 1**

**\*INT = INTERPRETER**

**MAJ GEN  
BERGNER:**

Okay. Good afternoon everybody. As-Salāmu `Alaykum. I have a brief operational summary and then we'll be glad to take your questions. Even as security trends improve, Iraqi and coalition forces continue to pressure and disrupt al-Qaeda – Iraq and other extremist groups here. In recent weeks, Iraqi and coalition forces captured or killed 26 senior leaders in the al-Qaeda – Iraq terrorist network. Eight were al-Qaeda emirs, meaning they exercised responsibility for a geographic or functional area. Five were al-Qaeda cell leaders. And the remaining 13 were terrorist facilitators. They were either involved in supporting the network of foreign terrorists, organizing the movement and security of senior leaders of the terrorist cells, or the making and use of improvised explosives and suicide vests. The ten most significant are listed on this slide and include five emirs, four cell leaders, and one facilitator. Manhal Fadil Salih Ahmad led a cell responsible for suicide attacks that operated primarily in Southeast Mosul where he was captured. His cell coordinated and carried out attacks on Iraqi and coalition forces. Jasim `Abdallah Salih Shibil was captured in Sharqat where he was the al-Qaeda emir. He had previously operated in the Bayji area where he was wanted for attacks against Iraqi and coalition forces and local Iraqi civilian volunteers. `Ammar Rashid Barbuti Hassan was captured in Tikrit where he operated as the al-Qaeda

emir. He led efforts to import foreign terrorists and to make and move weapons for terror attacks. Najm 'Abdallah 'Abbas Mahdi ran an al-Qaeda cell that coordinated and carried out car bomb attacks and assassinations in Baghdad where we captured him. His terror cell also moved weapons and explosives to al-Qaeda networks committing crimes south of the capitol. Rushdi Hamid Shihab Ahmad was al-Qaeda's military emir for Karkh. We captured him in Baghdad where he had been coordinating and carrying out car bomb attacks in the western and southern areas. As we announced earlier, coalition forces also killed Abu Yasir al-Saudi, also known as Jar Allah in Mosul. Al-Saudi was the al-Qaeda emir for Southeast Mosul and directed the terror network there. That same strike also killed al-Saudi's associate, Hajji Hamdan, who led an al-Qaeda cell that specialized in attacks against Iraqi and coalition forces. Abu Salim was an al-Qaeda cell leader in Mosul where he was killed. He was a Saudi Arabian national who coordinated the movement of fellow foreign terrorists into the Mosul area. Fannr Mubarak Muhammad Farhan was captured in the Tikrit area where he was an al-Qaeda facilitator who moved foreign terrorists and weapons in the area to the east of Tikrit. He was also illegally imprisoning individuals and training other terrorists. Abu Hassan was killed in Baqubah. He was al-Qaeda's deputy emir for the province of Diyala and he led the

network in that region that carried out car bomb attacks. Iraqi and coalition operations have also targeted the Ansar al-Sunna terror network. Nawaf Latfi Rida Jarrah, who we captured in Mosul, was responsible for commanding Ansar al-Sunna's operations in that area. Ansar al-Sunna, also known as Ansar al-Islam, is a terrorist group that associated with al-Qaeda in the Mosul area. And under Jarrah's direction, the group carried out attacks against coalition and Iraqi forces, including Kurdish security guards there. In more recent operations, an Iraqi Special Weapons and Tactics team, operating in Northeast Mosul on February 29th, detained three terrorists including the leader of a cell responsible for assassinations and improvised explosive device attacks. On March 1st, Iraqi security forces, working with soldiers from Multi-National Division – Baghdad, conducted an operation here in the Doura area of the capitol. The raid was based on numerous tips from Iraqis concerned with safety and security in their neighborhood. The operation resulted in the detention of an al-Qaeda cell terrorist who was linked to IEDs, or improved explosive devices, and indirect fire attacks. Also on March 1st, coalition forces operating in East Mosul exploited previous operational intelligence that was gained in the operations against Abu Yasir al-Saudi who I mentioned earlier. Three more suspected terrorists were detained as a result of that intelligence. The next day, coalition forces conducted operations in

Sharqat and captured a leader from al-Qaeda's Bayji network who operated an assassination cell in that area. Five of his associates were also detained. And also on Sunday, in Tal Afar, the Special Weapons and Tactics team there conducted an intelligence-driven operation in the western part of Ninawa Province. The Iraqi unit was approaching their objective, a terrorist camp bordering Awadi[ph] System, when they were attacked. One of the SWAT team's vehicles was hit by machine gun fire, killing three of the Iraqi Special Weapons and Tactics members and wounding three others. The Tal Afar Special Weapons and Tactics team responded, killing nine terrorists and wounding five enemy fighters. The operation resulted in the detention of eight other terrorists who are assessed to be responsible for planning and facilitating attacks on Iraqi and coalition forces and were using improvised explosive devices as well as setting up illegal checkpoints and conducting rocket attacks into Tal Afar. Even in the face of the Iraqi people's broad rejection of al-Qaeda's corrupt ideology, indiscriminate violence, and oppressive practices, this past Sunday a new message from the second in command of al-Qaeda was published on extremist Web sites promoting violence. In the message, Ayman Al-Zawahiri actually condemns those who have rejected suicide bombings and attacks on innocent civilians. Despite al-Qaeda's calls for violence, the Iraqi people are rejecting them on the very

basis that the terrorist seek to legitimize themselves: violence. We are heartened by the courage of the Iraqi people who are restoring security to their communities, who are working closely with their security forces and the coalition, and who are standing up to the threats and attacks from the extremists including the perverse calls from al-Qaeda's foreign leaders. And with that as an initial update, I will take your questions. Yes, sir.

**REP1:** Speaks in Arabic.

**INT:** Ahmed Jassem from Arabiya Newspaper. The Iraqi citizen now feels or is concerned...has a concern due to the attacks on the Iraqi soil in Northern Iraq under the pretext of eliminating the P.K.K. And as we have seen, the Turkish Army is inside the Iraqi soil. And tomorrow it could happen...the same thing from the Iranians under the pretext of the Mujahadeen-e-Khalq. So what is the procedure and the response that you can do regarding this?

**MAJ GEN BERGNER:** Well I think everyone agrees that the terrorist threat that the P.K.K. represents to the Government of Turkey, the citizens of Turkey, to others in the region is one that's best addressed by very close, bilateral work between the Government of Iraq and the Government of Turkey. And it's one...and that is an area that we understand the

Government of Iraq is now working closely with the Government of Turkey on. And we look forward to the bilateral effort that can come to broader solutions to the P.K.K. problem. Shukran. Yes, sir.

**REP2:** Asks question in Arabic.

**INT:** Question from Al-Mahda Newspaper. During the past three months there has been an operation...military operations in southern Baghdad, especially in Doura. Will there be other operations against al-Qaeda or will the joint forces will only conduct operations...will there be further operations in southern Baghdad?

**MAJ GEN BERGNER:** Yeah. As I mentioned earlier, Multi-National Division – Baghdad, working with Iraqi security forces, just this past weekend conducted successful operations against al-Qaeda cells in that part of the capitol. And they will continue to seek out the al-Qaeda threat wherever it is and continue to help reduce it, disrupt their networks, and help protect the Iraqi people from their indiscriminate and senseless violence. Shukran. Yes, sir.

**REP3:** Asks question in Arabic.

**INT:** Question from Al-Farat TV. There's talk about the Multi-National Forces will not hand over the security or will. Do you think the

Iraqi security forces are ready now according to the supplies that it has right now?

**MAJ GEN  
BERGNER:**

Let me just ask my translator to summarize the question one more time, please.

**INT:**

There are talks that the or...there is talk that the Multi-National Forces intends to hand over the security to the Iraqi security forces in Iraq in general. Do you think that...is this true? And if it is true, do you think Iraqi security forces are ready based on the supplies and the weapons that they have?

**MAJ GEN  
BERGNER:**

Yeah. Okay. Shukran. I understand. Thank you. The Iraqi security forces today number about 531,000; and that includes the police, the Iraqi Army, the border enforcement, the various special units that comprise some of their Army and some of their police units, the national police as well. We have actually seen, really as I described here, we have seen an increasing number of instances where Iraqi security forces are the first line of defense, where they are operating in offensive operations similar to those near Tal Afar with the Iraqi Special Weapons and Tactics team and being very effective. We also see in 9 of 18 provinces in Iraq that Iraqi security forces along with the civil authority in those provinces have achieved a level of



responsibility that's referred to as provincial Iraqi control which means Iraqi security forces, working with their civil authorities, are in the first line of responsibility in providing security in those provinces. And so that transition is very much underway already. The key enablers that remain are to continue developing the institutional training base, the logistics support bases that are necessary for Iraqi units to support themselves, the development of things...special capabilities like intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems. And those are underway as well and are proceeding. Last year, about 100,000 Iraqi citizens joined the ranks of the Iraqi security forces and so there continues to be a very significant and strong commitment on the part of the Iraqi people to serve in their security forces which is another key component of moving forward and assuming responsibility for security. And so there are several areas where we could point to the progress that's already been achieved. And there are also many more areas that have to be developed further. But we are very encouraged by the progress the Iraqi forces are making. And based on the conditions on the ground, based on the threat that the Iraqi forces are confronted with, and based on the development of the civil authority to work with the Iraqi security forces at the provincial level, further progress will certainly be achieved this year. Shukran.

**REP4:**

Jerry from AFP. Two questions. Has the U.S. military handed over or is about to handover the custody of Ali Hassan al-Majid after his execution was approved by the Iraqi Presidency a few days back? And have the two Shi'a officials who were found not guilty two days back, have they been released? I mean Deputy...former Deputy Minister Zamili and his security chief. What's the latest on that?

**MAJ GEN  
BERGNER:**

Okay. Based on a request from the Government of Iraq this morning, coalition forces released the former deputy minister of health, Hakim al-Zamili, and the former Ministry of Health facilities protective service chief, Hamid al-Shamari from the detention facility where they were being held at the Government of Iraq's request. So, yes, they have been released. The Government of Iraq has not presented the Multi-National Force with a request yet for the release of Majid. And once that does happen, we will fulfill our responsibility once they...once that request has been submitted to us. Yes, ma'am.

**REP5:**

Alexandra Zafas[ph] from the LA Times. Just a follow up from that. What kind of steps are being taken to protect the witnesses in the case involving the health ministry officials?

**MAJ GEN  
BERGNER:**

Yeah. That's a question I would really...would ask that you offer to

the Ministry of Justice and to Judge Medhat and the Higher Juridical Council that's responsible for those affairs because I think that's very much their prerogative to address that question. Yes, sir.

**REP6:** Asks question in Arabic.

**INT:** Question from a Japanese news agency. I would like to ask about al-Qaeda and the number of Iraqis that have been captured among al-Qaeda. Are most of them foreign fighters or Iraqis? And could you give us an...could you analyze this compared with those who have been captured two years ago, let's say? And also I'd like a clarification about the backgrounds of the senior leaders that have been captured. Are they still coming from the former security services, from Saddam's regime or they are Ba'athists or normal people? The second question. It's been five years for Operation Iraqi Freedom. What's the percentage of...you achieved in eliminating al-Qaeda? Is it 60-70%? And have you found out why al-Qaeda is being concentrated or exists in Sunni areas in particular?

**MAJ GEN BERGNER:** Well, to the main part of your question. We have talked extensively over the past several months about the nature of significant foreign-led leadership of al-Qaeda – Iraq and the fact that it does rely on people like Abu Ayyub al-Masri who is an Egyptian, Al-Tunisi who

we killed south of Baghdad [and] who is a foreigner, the Turki[ph] brothers...the al-Turki brothers who were key facilitators of foreign fighters in Northern Iraq. And so there is a range of the foreign fighter dimension that is the central part of the leadership of al-Qaeda – Iraq. That also though...we have also said very forthrightly that the rank and file of al-Qaeda – Iraq is largely Iraqi and it is...comes from a variety of backgrounds. And I'm not sure I can better characterize that than to say it is a diverse background. There has been significant progress against al-Qaeda over the last several years. And most recently, in the past year, we have made a significant effort to disrupt and put more pressure, not only on their networks, but geographically on places where they have sought to operate from: their safe havens and operating bases. And we continue to keep that pressure up because, as you heard from Ayman al-Zawahiri's statement this past weekend, this is an organization that is perpetuating and dependent upon a continued focus on violence. And they use indiscriminate violence. They use their oppressive practices and their corrupt ideology with a very specific purpose: to subjugate the people of Iraq in what they would call a new caliphate. So we have made progress in the past several years. We still have a great deal more to do. And as we pointed out this afternoon, this is a tough fight as evidenced by the Iraqi Special Weapons and Tactics engagement west of Tal Afar. And as

evidenced by numerous other coalition and Iraqi security forces' courageous operations. So there has been progress. And it's most clearly manifested in the reductions in the levels of violence. But reductions, albeit, that still need to go further. And so we are continuing to press the networks. We are continuing to press in areas where they would seek to re-establish safe havens and operating bases. And this will be a tough fight for some time to come. That tough fight though is significantly enabled by the courage of the Iraqi people, by the decisions that are being made at the local level by Concerned Local Citizens to restore security in their neighborhoods. And those two factors are the ones that have the greatest promise for Iraq in dealing with the security threats. It's the courage of the Iraqi people and their work with their security forces and with the government. And we are working closely with all of them in that regard. Shukran. Yes, sir.

**REP7:** Asks question in Arabic.

**INT:** Question from Al-Wata[ph] News...TV. Some specialists say that the security in Iraq is fragile and it's not true that it's based on a sectarian division, each sect from a neighborhood provides security according to its own place. Do you think that's real? Do you think that security has been achieved according to sectarian divisions? Or it's based...is it fragile or is it firm?

**MAJ GEN  
BERGNER:**

Well, there's no question that the security gains...the hard-fought security gains that the Iraqi people and coalition and Iraqi security forces have achieved over the past—particularly over the past year—are still fragile in many respects. And there is still a great deal of work that's required. I'm not sure there is a simple answer to your question other than to say we have seen...in Sunni and Shi'a and Kurdish neighborhoods we have seen a rejection of violence. We have seen a willingness on the part of communities to work with their local citizens as well as with Iraqi security forces in the coalition. And that is what is enabling the progress that's being achieved. It's been fueled and supported by the surge, but it's the courage and the commitment of the Iraqi people at the local level. And I think that it deserves to be said that that crosses many ethnosectarian dimensions in Iraq. It's happening south of Baghdad. It's happening in Baghdad. It's happening north of Baghdad. Certainly it's happening out west in Anbar Province as well. Shukran. Yes, sir.

**REP8:**

Asks question in Arabic.

**INT:**

Question from the Iraq Republic Radio. Do you have any statistics regarding the al-Qaeda now in Iraq? And is there still a flow with the foreign fighters into Iraq? And where are they coming from?

Which countries? And which country do you think is not cooperating in stopping the flow of the foreign fighters?

**MAJ GEN  
BERGNER:**

Well, we know that al-Qaeda – Iraq continues to depend on and seek the support of foreign fighters and they continue to try to facilitate their movement into Iraq. And these foreign fighters are frequently those who are involved in the most horrific attacks: the suicide bombs, the suicide vest attacks. And they come from a number of countries. They come from countries in the Middle East. They come from countries in North Africa. And they use a number and variety of different transit points to arrive here. We have seen progress on the part of some neighboring countries to restrict and to try to limit the flow of foreign fighters either through their country or from their country. There is still a great deal more work that needs to be done there. And we are engaged with them and their intelligence services to share information and to encourage action... where actionable intelligence is developed, to encourage them to take the necessary steps. So we have seen some steps to cooperate in that regard. I would also point out that the Government of Iraq has engaged its neighbors on specifically those issues as well. Both through the Neighbors' Conference and through the Border Security Working Group, they have engaged all of their neighbors and sought to improve their border security cooperation, their

immigration, and their intelligence-sharing procedures that could further limit the flow of foreign terrorists that fuel al-Qaeda – Iraq. Shukran. Yes, sir.

**REP9:** Asks question in Arabic.

**INT:** Question from Al-Watan TV. Eliminating terrorism is based or depends on eliminating the safe havens or the places that they originate from. What are the activities that the Multi-National Forces are doing, and the American administration, because it's the greatest ally to eliminate sources...the main sources of al-Qaeda that is the logistics support and the other things?

**MAJ GEN BERGNER:** Yeah. We have recognized throughout the last ten months now, almost a year, the importance of targeting areas that had become either safe havens or operating bases for al-Qaeda. And that was very much a central part of the surge strategy which focused not only on improving security in Baghdad, but doing so by going into the belts around Baghdad and then pressing outward to further reduce those safe havens. That continues to be a focus of our offensive operations. And it will continue to be so because we know that al-Qaeda will seek to continue to relocate and we will continue to pursue and keep the pressure on to limit their capability to re-establish the logistics bases you talk about and the operating bases



they seek. The other component of this is hand in hand with our offensive operations, there has to be an important effort to improve the security and the services as areas become more secure and stable. The Government of Iraq has committed itself to that and we are working closely with them to assist. In fact, in that regard, even as we sit here today, Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih has led a group of some 16 members of the Council of Ministers and they are meeting with the 7 governors in Northern Iraq to discuss specifically the reconstruction, the economic development needs, and the specific requirements to improve essential services in those provinces north of Baghdad. And so the deputy prime minister's effort today, bringing leadership from the central government to work directly with seven governors of the northern provinces, is indirectly getting at exactly the same point which is helping consolidate the security gains that have been achieved and improve the security, not just through kinetic means but through the better provision of services and making a tangible improvement in the lives of the citizens. In this case, in the seven northern provinces. And I would point out also that that trip is just one more in a series of six or seven Government of Iraq outreach efforts that have seen Government of Iraq trips to Anbar, to Basra, to Hillah, to Diyala. And so I think it's a good reflection that the Government of Iraq is continuing to press the initiative, take the steps to go meet with the

provincial leaders, in this case in the northern seven provinces. To have that important discussion about what steps [are] necessary to consolidate the gains that have been achieved in the security situation. Shukran. Anybody else? Okay. I think some of your colleagues are actually up there covering that event because I can see a number of seats that would otherwise have them in it. So I thank you very much. And shukran jaziilan. Ma'salama.